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NHTSA Public Meeting on Driver Distraction
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Driver distraction is perhaps the most demanding highway traffic safety issue of the day. For us at the Department of Transportation working in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, - driver distraction is a broad subject area that includes everything from radios and fast food to Internet connections and on-board navigation devices. I was eager to participate in today's meeting because we in the highway safety community must take every opportunity to explore and share information about this critically important subject. To meet with the individuals, organizations, and industries represented here today is a special opportunity.

For more than three decades - since its founding in 1966 - the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration - has grappled with many threats to public safety on America's roadways. The challenges we confronted over these many years range from drivers who are too impaired by alcohol to drive safely or testing the protective benefits of seat belt systems.

Driver distraction is not a new problem. NHTSA has been studying and confronting distraction issues for many years. Yet, the driver distraction of today is far different than in years past. It is related to innovative technologies that are entering vehicles at breathtaking speed - whether it is wireless telephones, Internet services, navigation devices, or new sophisticated entertainment centers.

The driver distraction that traditionally was a single device or stimulus is now a diffused and often difficult-to-define set of issues. The stunning speed from innovation to installation is so fast that NHTSA's first awareness of a product or service may well be when it is already being designed into or carried into a vehicle and used by a driver on the road.

The driver's responsibility is to operate the vehicle safely. Distraction degrades driver performance. Multiple distractions and more complex distractions degrade driving performance even more. For all driver distractions, including wireless phones, the gathering evidence is persistent and clear. Whether the information comes from anecdotal reports, real-world data, or research, we have a serious problem on our roadways now and it is growing.

We cannot dismiss anecdotal reports, although they are unreliable sometimes. They are continual and straight-forward. Real-world data is limited at this point, and, for years to come, may not be robust enough to measure distraction precisely or justify a particular course of action. But the real-world data we can assess leads us to conclude that drivers' use of wireless phones in moving vehicles is contributing to crashes.

Research is further along. We are using many tools and techniques that have matured over the years to assess new forms of distraction - the use of wireless phones, in particular. NHTSA's National Advanced Driving Simulator, which will come on-line by the end of this year, will provide unprecedented opportunities for detailed, repeatable research on such driver fitness issues as distraction and fatigue.

But all of the information to date, from all sources, is consistent - each separate story, each data set, and each research paper adds to the growing body of evidence.

Increasing distractions, increase the risk and in turn lead to unintended consequences.

I am not aware of a single instance - not one - of information that suggests distraction is not a problem, or that we have misunderstood it, or that it is lessening. Driver distraction, in all its forms and from all its sources, is a real

threat to the safety of America's roads.

This threat is growing and growing fast. Wireless phones are the fastest penetrating technology in history. Just a few short years ago - to see someone talking on a wireless phone anywhere was still relatively rare. Today, a regular commute trip without seeing two, three, or more drivers talking on their wireless phones while their vehicles are in motion is relatively rare.

Knowing of a traffic safety threat is often easier than mitigating that traffic safety threat. Data and information that are clearly worrisome enough to recognize risks and warn of their consequences are not nearly complete enough to support a given solution or validate a particular action. Further complicating the search for solutions are the equivocal, and sometimes vague, public arguments that obscure what must be good-faith efforts to confront distraction issues directly and effectively. Here are five.

- **Assertion Number One:** "The genie is out of the bottle" - that potentially distractive devices have invaded the driver's domain so pervasively, attempts to control them now are impossible or ill-advised.
- **Response:** This problem will grow larger and more complex. Waiting only increases the difficulty we will have solving it.

- **Assertion Number Two:** Eating fast food, applying cosmetics, and other in-car distractions also present risks, so why are we not worrying about them?

- **Response:** We have work to do on all forms of driver distraction. But, we should not accept one risk because we have yet to address another or because have accepted a particular risk.

- **Assertion Number Three:** Hands-free equipment will lessen or eliminate driver distraction.
- **Response:** Hands-free is not risk free.

  NHTSA research and other research clearly show that we must be concerned with manual distraction, visual distraction, and cognitive distraction. Hands-free, depending upon the equipment, may reduce both manual and visual distraction - but it will not affect or reduce cognitive distraction.

  Some researchers believe cognitive distraction is the most problematic. I have not seen any research or studies that suggest hands-free devices will solve the distraction problem. If anyone is aware of such research, NHTSA's scientists would like to review it.

  Suggesting solutions for part of the problem without addressing the whole problem may simply postpone a better, more complete solution.

- **Assertion Number Four:** Existing laws are adequate to deter drivers from the inappropriate use of distracting devices.
- **Response:** NHTSA's preliminary review and assessment suggest that existing laws are not necessarily adequate to limit distractions from wireless phones or other electronics. The nature of distraction-related crashes is that they often occur under conditions where the driver may not be exhibiting overtly negligent behavior - they occur when unexpected events happen. Moreover, only a few states have "inattentive driving" laws, and they are not uniformly enforced.

- **Assertion Number Five:** Wireless phones and other devices contribute to highway safety, because they allow people immediately to notify law enforcement and emergency services, reducing their response time, or provide directions to drivers who may be lost or unfamiliar with an area.
- **Response:** While these benefits are certainly real, they in no way reduce the risks from a driver's use of a wireless phone or other devices in a moving vehicle and that is the threat we are addressing today. Moreover, we obtain these same benefits, if the caller or user is not driving or if only 911 calls are possible in moving vehicles.

Like many traffic safety challenges, solving this one will require all interests coming together to contribute to its eventual resolution. All of those involved in highway safety - whether in government, industry, or the public at large - are responsible for raising and debating the important questions of driver distraction. The highway traffic safety community must expand to include those who design,

manufacture, and service the computers, navigation systems, and other devices used on the roads and installed in vehicles. You can become one of our most important partners for years to come.

Let me briefly mention a couple of areas where we can work together. First, we all need good quality and uniform data. Perhaps with the help of other devices in the vehicle, such as event data recorders, we can determine which device was in use when a crash occurred. Recognizing the private nature of much of the data, we must use it only for statistical indicators and for maintaining a data base to help define the problem. We need states to work with us to develop better data on driver distraction through a uniform data collection methodology with which NHTSA will enthusiastically assist you. If manufacturers make their test and evaluation data available to NHTSA, we can independently evaluate the results. NHTSA can help manufacturers and service providers publicize safe use information for people who use the products.

We are experiencing a dramatic change in driver behavior. Every day, you see more and more drivers using wireless phones. It is hard to ignore that wireless phone use is increasing at an exploding rate. We can expect a similar pattern for other devices. It follows - and it is illogical to suggest otherwise - that increasing distractions increase the risk and lead to unintended consequences.

If we underestimate this potential risk to highway traffic safety and do not moderate drivers' use of in-vehicle systems, the price may be very steep, indeed. We cannot wake up in 2004 or 2003, or even a year from now, and excuse the possibly scores or hundreds of deaths - or the injuries to thousands more - because we failed to ask the right questions and we failed to seek answers when we had the opportunity. That opportunity is now. This public meeting is one of the steps in that journey. The Internet forum that we have underway until August 11 is another.

NHTSA's consumer information will now include advice that growing evidence suggests using a wireless phone or other electronic device while driving can be distracting and drivers should not talk on the phone or use other devices while their vehicles are in motion. As effective as government might be in providing this advice, it will not be enough to affect significantly the problem or reduce the threat.

Driver distraction is a shared problem and everyone has a role in solving it. The federal government has a role, state legislatures have a role, as do safety organizations and other traditional highway safety partners. Manufacturers and service providers whose products and services create the credible and substantial risk to highway safety have a special role.

Like vehicle manufacturers and many others, the in-vehicle systems industries are responsible for understanding and assessing their products' risks to their customers and others on the highway - before they become a major threat to the public. Manufacturers and service providers are responsible for understanding the safety implication of their devices; designing features to mitigate risks; and providing effective consumer information to resolve any remaining risk.

The plethora of gadgets and gizmos that are being designed into vehicles as standard equipment may be the much bigger threat of tomorrow. In the interim, we must learn more about the risks of today's devices, including drivers' use of wireless phones in moving vehicles. Will we learn about those risks and deal with them expeditiously, or will we wait for rising numbers of deaths and injuries? That is the challenge we face today.